The Scottish Monarchy Captures the English Throne:

James VI’s Campaign for the English Crown

In the second half of the sixteenth century England prospered under the benevolent rule of Queen Elizabeth. During her “golden rule,” English sea dogs defeated the Spanish Armada and England launched her first expeditions to establish colonies in the New World. Elizabeth captivated her subjects and her popularity was reflected in the name of their permanent colony – Virginia – for she was affectionately called the Virgin Queen.

This accolade, offered in praise to a woman who sacrificed her personal satisfaction for the national welfare – also underscores the primary political problem of her reign – her lack of progeny. While her unmarried status was used to political advantage for 30 years, in the closing decades of her reign it constituted a serious concern. Who would succeed the Virgin Queen? Who would safeguard the Reformation and defend the Protestant cause after she died? Would her death plunge the nation into another Civil conflict like the War of the Roses?

In the past three decades historians have viewed the problem from the Queen’s point of view. Elizabeth’s struggle to hold her people together, to defend Protestantism and to mold an English nation has been given much consideration. (1) All this attention focused on Tudor efforts to maintain governmental stability and forge a strong Protestant England has overshadowed the fundamental problem of the reign – the question of succession. Elizabeth was childless and though she ruled longer than any of her predecessors since Edward III, she refused to name an heir. Elizabeth’s policy was carefully calculated. The Virgin Queen was well aware of the difficulties inherent in her position. She had been “heir apparent” during the childless reign of her sister Mary. She would have no star on the horizon as her own waned. Even on her deathbed, sensing the intrigue about her, she tersely observed that, “Now the wit of the fox is everywhere on foot, so as hardly a faithful or virtuous man may be found.” (2) While her political acumen remained sharp to the end, she did little to end the uncertainty. As the selection of a successor and the peaceful transition of government became an increasing concern to her subjects, she prohibited her servants to aide the rival candidates who vied for her place. Yet, despite the fears of the court and country, the transition of power was smooth and bloodless. Within hours of her death, Elizabeth’s successor was proclaimed by the Privy Council. Men of all stations in life and of all religious persuasions – Puritan, Catholic and Anglican – cheered the succession of James VI to the English Crown.
In retrospect the Scottish conquest of the English throne seemed quite natural. The tendency to accept the regularity of inherited kingship, James VI's superior blood claims, and his immediate acceptance by the English have hidden the uniqueness of the Stuart succession. While most historians treat the transition as a "normal" occurrence, James himself would have disagreed sharply with them. His conquest of England was the result of a long and conscientious political and propaganda enterprise by which the Scottish sovereign built up a following in England which made the events of 1603 possible. It might be argued that Elizabeth could be counted among his supporters, as she encouraged his aspirations. Yet she refused to acknowledge him publicly as her successor, thus forcing him to contend long and hard against a wide field of rivals for over two decades. While James may have overrated his competition or underestimated his own position -- the fact was that he strongly desired the English throne and deeply feared it would be denied him. He sought to secure the English crown by launching one of the first political campaigns in British history. James "ran for office" using techniques and policies which are surprisingly varied and modern. He was determined to gain the English crown, and did everything he could to achieve this end. Thus he embarked on a peaceful program of conquest, to court a nation's affections and to deter his competitors.

Who was it that challenged his claim? Of the fourteen descendants who could trace marital ties or Tudor bloodlines in their veins and lay claim to the English throne -- only four -- the Spanish Infanta, Lord Hertford, Lady Arabella Stuart and Philip II could be counted as serious rivals to the claims of the Scottish King, James VI. (3) Though James clearly had the strongest bloodlines he had many obstacles to overcome. Mary Stuart's plots against Elizabeth and traditional Scottish antipathy constituted one difficulty. Second was Elizabeth's refusal to acknowledge him publicly. Moreover, she threatened to outlive him. Exasperated by her longevity, James once asked his advisors if she intended to frustrate his claims by "enduring as long as the sunne, and the moone." (4)

If Elizabeth's long reign posed a severe test for James' desire, the Scottish Prince was equal to the challenge. He saw the English crown as his financial and political salvation. He compared Elizabeth's court to his own in Scotland, noting that "Saint George surely rides upon a toadily riding horse where I am daily bursten in daunting a wild unruly colt." He was determined to gain the English throne as Elizabeth's successor, and he set out to win the English people as the main way to secure his accession and gain his much coveted prize. (5)

The first real test of James' determination to succeed Elizabeth came in 1586 after his mother was convicted of treason and sentenced to death. James, informed that Mary's trial had not tainted his claim to the succession, was warned that if he attempted to intercede too strongly to save his mother he would become associated with her conspiracy and be barred from the succession under the Act passed by the English Parliament in 1584. The choice was clear. To save his mother, he would have to sacrifice his own claims. Although the Scottish nobility would have supported him strongly in a war to
save Mary's life, James refused. His instructions to his envoys were decisive. While they were told "earnestly" to try to save Mary they were to take equal care "that our title to that Crown be not prejudiced." James sent many pleas and emissaries to entreat Elizabeth to suspend Mary's execution but he never threatened Elizabeth. He could have broken the Anglo-Scottish Alliance as Elizabeth feared, but that would have entailed a risk that James was unwilling to take. In fact, James' final plea for his mother's life hinted that while all the other Christian leaders would denounce her for this terrible deed, one exception might be expected. Though James did little to halt the border raids after Mary's execution, he prevented a war of revenge and expanded his campaign to gain support to succeed the Tudors. (6)

In the decade after Mary's execution James' efforts became more consciously directed toward countering the issues which threatened his success. His first area of concern centered on legal issues. James' claim by lineage was the strongest, for his mother Mary was the granddaughter of the first marriage of Margaret Tudor — Henry VIII's oldest sister — and his father, her cousin, Lord Darnley, descended from Margaret's second marriage — through the house of Lennox. But James was an alien born in Scotland, and English common law clearly precluded foreigners from inheriting English land. The Scottish sovereign was concerned that his first cousin Arabella Stuart — who descended through the second marriage of Margaret Tudor but who was born and raised on English soil — might use this custom to oppose James and aid her own claims.

Fears of her challenge on this issue prompted James to demand frequently from Elizabeth the land of his grandparents, Duke and Dutchess of Lennox. Though the Stuart monarch persisted, the Queen remained firm in her refusal. James, determined not to cede the issue, claimed that the pension given him as part of the Anglo-Scottish Alliance was really given in compensation for the Lennox land — thus giving him a basis to claim that he was not really an alien in the eyes of the English law.

A second legal complication facing the Scottish candidate was the will of Henry VIII. Elizabeth's father stipulated that if his heir were childless, the succession should go to the descendants of his younger sister, Mary — not Margaret — thus excluding both James and Arabella. Fortunately for the Scottish monarch, Mary Tudor's surviving descendant from her marriage with Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, was not a serious contender. The chief representative of this line, Edward Seymour, Lord Beauchamp, was handicapped by the questionable legality of his mother's marriage as well as by his own lack of ability and ambition. These considerations virtually made his candidacy inconsequential, especially when coupled with the prevailing view of his contemporaries that he was unfit to rule. None of the other serious contenders for the English throne benefited by raising this issue and it was not a factor which received much attention from James. Still, the legal status of his claim worried the Scottish monarch. He feared the Act of 1584 by which Mary's claim was voided and she met the headsman's blade. He was concerned that it might be used against him. His sensitivity in this regard was demonstrated by his extreme reaction to the charge made by a disgruntled English Catholic,
Valentine Thomas, implying that James had encouraged him to assassinate Elizabeth. Although the Queen wrote her cousin that she did not believe the tale, and she kept Thomas quiet in prison until her death, James demanded absolution. He tried to get Elizabeth to destroy all records of the case and he wanted her to issue a declaration proclaiming his innocence to the world, but she refused. When James ascended the English throne he had Thomas speedily tried and executed. (7)

Another concern regarding the legality of James’ claim which committed him to defend his mother’s reputation was his fear of the accusation of illegitimacy. Mary’s relationship with her Italian secretary, Rizzio, had provided the material for scandalous rumors, and her political and marital manoeuvring provided the necessary motivation for her enemies to keep the rumors alive. James was determined to prevent his detractors from asserting that he was born out of wedlock. In 1596 he persuaded the Scottish Parliament to pass an act making it a capital offense - treason - to defame the King’s parents or children. The law was not an idle warning; it brought death to at least two of his Scottish subjects who were foolish enough to violate it.

This concern was also reflected in the King’s published propaganda. The Stuart Monarch noted that he had been accused falsely, of having a vindictive attitude toward England “only grounded upon the strait charge I give my Sonne, not to heare nor suffer any unrevener speeches or booke against any of his parents or progenitors.” He made clear his respect for his mother’s good name and praised those who remained loyal to her. While he claimed to merely be a good son honoring his mother’s reputation he neglected to point out that by doing so he was also protecting his own title and claim to the English throne. (8)

The second of James’ campaigns consisted of a general appeal to gain the affections of his future subjects. In the last decade of his predecessor’s reign James sought the support of the major religious and court factions in England. He coupled this propaganda appeal with an attempt to build a following among the officials, nobles and councillors at the court of St. James. As one of the Scottish monarch’s recent biographers observed:

“...he convinced himself that the world was willing to assist him and he saw an ally behind every bush. Yet he followed his purpose with rare pertanacy and with considerable shrewdness.” (9)

The first group to be courted openly by James were the Puritans. While they were aware of James’ conflicts with the Scottish Presbyterians they also knew that some of the Stuart Prince’s tutors, like Buchanan, sympathized with their cause. They hoped his references to his religious beliefs as “the religion wherein I was brought up” was on acknowledgement of this earlier influence. When Elizabeth’s Archbishop Whitgift destroyed the Marprelate Press and began to persecute the moderate, as well as the extremist Puritans, James interceded on their behalf. Carefully excluding radicals from his appeal, James wrote the Tudor Queen and asked that for his sake, “Puritan ministers be relieved of their present straight.” (10) James’ support for the moderate leadership did not waiver when several of the divines were expelled from their
University and imprisoned by the Court of Star Chamber. Thomas Cartwright, one of their leaders, dedicated his book of Latin Homilies to the Scottish King and announced that he was honored by James’ offer of a professorship at the University of St. Andrew during his exile. (11)

James courted the Puritans with public praise and sympathy as well as with private offers. He told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in remarks which were well reported by English Puritans, that “as for our neighbor, Kirk in England, it is an evil mass said in English wanting nothing but the lifting.” Another tale described James in Edinburgh where with “bonnet off and hands uplifted,” he “praised God that he was king of the Scottish Church, the purest kirk in the world.” The Scottish minister Galloway assisted his Prince by circulating stories of James’ sympathy for many of the Puritan demands. Galloway reported that James, after hearing one of his sermons for more preaching and an adequately supplied and resident clergy, promised his “full resolution and purpose . . . to establish such a ministry throughout all his dominions as fast as God might give him means unto it.” These reports were circulated by the Puritan leadership and bolstered their hopes as Elizabeth’s rule waned. (12)

This propaganda barrage continued until the succession issue was decided. The Stuart sovereign prepared an English edition of his BASILIKON DORON – a primer on kingship written for his son, Prince Henry. It went on sale in London just days after Elizabeth’s death. In a preface which had been specially added for its propaganda effect, the Stuart monarch appealed the majority of Puritans – the moderate reformers. He made a sharp distinction between the “brain sickie and headie preachers” – whom he refused to aid – and those sincere and reasonable Puritans who saw “popish error” in the wearing of the surplice and square cap and in other ceremonies – and to whom he would give his approval. He observed “there is presently a sufficient number of good of them (the Ministry) in this kingdom; and yet are they all knowne to be against the Forme of the English Church.” (13) These remarks and others had a profound effect on Puritan attitudes toward James’ candidacy. The moderate divines were willing to believe the Scottish monarch’s words and deeds because his entourage included many Scots sympathetic to their cause. They saw the accession of the Scottish sovereign as a guarantee of further reformation, if not by James himself then by his heir. This was expressed in the construction of the Millenary Petition which was their greeting to their new sovereign. The possibility of a Stuart succession occasioned great optimism among the Puritans, some of which was reflected in the frequently repeated jingle which was incorporated into many sermons. (14) It asserted that

Henry VIII destroyed monks and their cells
Henry IX will pull down bishops and their bells. (15)

James’ propaganda barrage and courtship of the Puritans which proved so successful did not mean that he abandoned the other large discontented religious faction in England – the Catholics. He feared the Catholic challenge to his claim and was sharply reminded of this danger in 1594 by the articulate Jesuit propagandist, Robert Parsons. In a clever book examining the rival contenders for the throne of St. James, Father Parsons
argued that religion, and not heredity, was the vital criteria of kingship. After examining each of the claimants, and giving special attention to James, he rejected all but the Spanish candidates. Father Parson’s brilliant style created not only an illusion of objectivity, but also the impression that King Philip II and his daughter, the Spanish Infanta — Isabella Clara Eugenia — were the superior contenders. By circumventing the issue of heredity through the Tudors, he concluded that the weak Spanish claim, descended through John of Gaunt, was incontestible. (16)

James was stunned by this shrewd attack and responded in kind. He defended hereditary monarchy by giving it the sanction of divine right and historical tradition in his book, THE TREW LAW OF FREE MONARCHIES. “Kings are called Gods by the prophetical King David,” he wrote, “because they sit upon God his Thorne in earth and have the count of their administration to give unto him.” By means of biblical citation and historical argument, James reinforced his claim of divinely guided, hereditary monarchy. Kings are only accountable “to that great God, who placed him as his lieutenant over them... that are committed to his charge.” (17) He reinforced his assertions of the hereditary character of monarchy in his later work, the BASILIkon DORON — asserting in both—that all subjects were bound in total obedience to their legal ruler and his descendants. As he wrote in 1598, and frequently repeated, “No objection either of heresie, or... private statute or law may free the people from their oath giving to their king and his succession... For he is their heritable overlord, and so by birth, not by any right in the coronation.” These arguments, put forward by James, were intended not only to Impress the English with the justice of his claim but also to demonstrate his ability and good character. As the Scottish monarch told his readers, his books reflected those qualities and characteristics which they could expect to find in him as their ruler. (18)

Even before his own replies appeared in print, a number of James’ courtiers responded to Parson’s assertions. An Irish poet and an English schoolteacher prepared refutations in Latin, while Peter Wentworth and other Englishmen like Sir John Hayward and the erratic cleric John Colville used their native language in James’ behalf. While only some of these were published, others circulated in manuscript form and became part of a growing literature which proclaimed the Scottish sovereign in the words of one poet, “A worthie, peerless Prince, (who) claymes Arthur’s seat, Borne to the same by heavenlike providence.” These responses to Parsons attack were part of James’ efforts to court Catholic support, and brought the succession issue into the area of international affairs. (19)

The Catholic cause had to be handled with diplomacy as well as with public statements. Since Elizabeth would be angered if his overtures to Catholic powers became known, James sent secret envoys of dubious reputation who could be denounced if their mission were exposed. An illustration of the difficulties of this maneuver is provided by the bizarre adventures of a Scottish Catholic who ventured through Flanders, Rome, northern Italy and Spain to gain the support of various Catholic groups for the Scottish King. He ended his days in a Spanish prison with his interrogators charging that his Scottish
master was a treacherous enemy of the Papal Church and insincere in his promises of toleration for Catholics. The charge was answered by the Jesuit activist William Crichton who was a good Scot and sympathetic to the Stuart claim. He defended his Prince as a temperate man who had crushed the wild Bothwell, treated the Catholics justly, and who had defended Mary to the best of his ability. The Spanish rejoinder to Crichton's pamphlet was inappropriate and counter-productive. Instead of vilifying James as its authors hoped, it served to accentuate the split between supporters and opponents of the Spanish cause. After the death of Philip II in 1598, James sent a second emissary to Spain to discourage the Spanish claim. The failure of the mission convinced James there was no hope of endorsement in this quarter.

James also attempted a number of overtures to gain the support of Henry IV of France and Pope Clement VIII. The French correspondence was as fruitless as the Spanish one, but the negotiations with the Pope – centering around the possibility of James' conversion – were still being pursued when Elizabeth died. This had the effect of keeping the Pope from taking any position on the succession question in England. The fortuitous result of the appeal to Rome should, in all honesty, be credited not to James but to the Pope's messenger who, due to illness and other complications, did not return to tell the Pope of James' deception until 1605. (20)

While James' overtures were rejected by most Catholic Princes on the continent, these negotiations were of considerable value in James' campaign for support among English Catholics because they made his promises of toleration seem more credible. As the stories of the visits of James' agents to Florence, Tuscany and Venice circulated, and as the Stuart monarch neglected to enforce his proclamation prohibiting his subjects from aiding Tyrone's Irish Catholic rebels, even more English adherents of the Universal Church came to believe that their religion might be tolerated if the Stuart monarch became their king. James encouraged these hopes through private audiences and secret correspondence. He once complained that the missives he received from Cecil's Catholic accomplice, Lord Henry Howard, would fill "Asiatic and endless volumes." His dealings gave rise to many Catholic tales which boasted of clear evidence "in the king's own hand" that he was a Catholic. Even the Pope accepted the possibility to the point of asking whether Prince Henry would be educated as a Catholic. (21)

The credibility of James' appeal to followers of the Roman Church rested on the foundation of his moderate treatment of them during his reign in Scotland. Loyal Papists were given recognition and advancement at the court of King James and the Scottish monarch encouraged English Catholics to expect similar treatment if he were to preside over the court of St. James. He told the Earl of Northumberland that

As for catholics I will neither persecute any that will be quiet and give but outward obedience to the law, neither will I spare to advance any of them that will by good service worthily deserve it. (22)

James promised to pardon several influential Catholics who opposed Elizabeth, and upon his accession he released them from imprisonment in the
Tower. Thus, by the first years of the seventeenth century James had succeeded in separating Catholic aspirations from the Spanish claim. Through a persistent campaign the Stuart contender had induced most English Catholics to abandon the cause of the Infanta by convincing them that his succession meant not only a peaceful transfer of government but also the possibility of toleration and even counter-reformation. When a Jesuit broadside attacked this view in 1601, branding the Scottish promises insincere and diabolical, it was virtually ignored by the English Catholics. By the conclusion of the Virgin Queen's reign, James could count the two major dissident religious factions in England among his supporters.

While this was an impressive achievement, it was even more remarkable when one considers that it was accomplished without alienating the Anglican establishment. As the court gossip, Chamberlain, noted in one of his letters, James was so successful that "not only Protestants, but Papists and Puritans promise themselves such great part in his favour." The Bishops knew of James' conflicts with the Presbyterians in Scotland and could draw hope from the fact that he had established the episcopacy of the Scottish church. James' emphasis on the obedience of citizens to their king and his church in both his TREW LAW OF FREE MONARCHY and his BASILIKON DORON convinced them that he meant to maintain the church hierarchy. They were cheered by James' disavowal of the religious radicals who strove to create "parity" in the church. Anglican bishops and ministers quoted James' barbs against the "preposterous humility of the Puritans," and hoped that he would bring them back into the fold. Nor were they worried by the Scottish Prince's promises to reform the English Church. Redress of many grievances - such as the poverty of the clergy - would benefit bishops as well as their subordinates. Several high Anglicans were sympathetic to Puritan demands for reforming the Book of Common Prayer, and it was only their leniency in regard to conformity which allowed Puritans to keep their jobs within the established church. As long as James continued to discourage radicalism and factions, they felt secure.

The Anglican leaders who saw James as the defender of their faith found encouragement in his personal behaviour as well as in his public statements. He wrote that all Christian Monarchs at their coronation "Give their Oath, First to maintaine the Religion presently professed . . . and to punish all those that should press to alter, or disturb the profession thereof." After his escape from the Gowrie Plot in Scotland, James proclaimed a special church service to mark the anniversary of his good fortune which was totally compatible with Anglican ecclesiastical policy. As his escape occured on a Tuesday, James developed a preference for Tuesday sermons which also impressed the English bishops, though it annoyed some of his servants. These actions added credence to the promises of James' agent Hamilton, who told the Archbishop that his master would "not only maintain and continue the Gospel there, but would not allow any other religion to be practised." These statements were believed, and the bishops rallied to James' cause and prepared sermons exalting his virtues. Some hoped that James would unite the laws and religion of England, Scotland and Wales like the Biblical King David who unified Judah
and Israel. Others, like Bishop Montague, were quick to proclaim on Elizabeth's death that "God has granted us a Solomon." The growing support of the Anglican leaders was apparent to James long before Archbishop Whitgift arranged for an enmissary to depart for Edinburgh on the Queen's expiration. (23)

The race to bring the news of Elizabeth's death offers clear proof of the success of James' policy of courting the different religious groups. A popular jingle described four of the principal Englishmen who rode north to greet the King. The interests represented by Sir Henry Bromley, Lord Thomas Howard, Dean Neville of Canterbury, and Lord Cobham, were clear to all who heard the chant:

Neville for the Protestants  
Lord Thomas for the Paptists  
Bromley for the Puritans  
Lord Cobham for the Atheists. (24)

Like all of the representatives of power groups in England, courtiers such as Sir Thomas Carew who won the race and received the boon of a government job for his efforts, also promised themselves that James' accession would bring them good fortune. Of all the groups wooed by the King, the courtiers proved the most troublesome. In the concluding years of the 16th century a conflict arose between the supporters of the impetuous but popular Earl of Essex and the faction of Elizabeth's "little beagle," Sir Robert Cecil. The Stuart Monarch strongly disliked Cecil's Scottish policy, and his advisors concurred in this sentiment. In contrast to the hunchbacked Cecil, the dashing Essex was a man of action. He was appealing to James because he opposed Cecil and because he was popular with the "masses" as well as with many influential Puritans. More important, Essex seemed sympathetic to the claims of the Scottish Sovereign. On one occasion he wrote James that "the affections of my heart breathe only after the prosperous success of a King of so much worth, whose servant I was borne by nature... the minds of all my countrymen will jointly unite their hopes in your Majesty's noble person." James happily responded with declarations of his affection and good wishes for Essex. One Scottish advisor assured Essex of his King's appreciation, telling the ambitious Earl that his efforts to aid James' cause were noted and that the Scottish King "promised to reward it in a proper place at a proper time." Essex's support proved to be a false advantage, for his failure in Ireland and his return home in violation of Elizabeth's orders brought his temporary imprisonment. While Essex was regaining his freedom, his friend Lord Mountjoy sent an emmissary to James to assure the Scottish Monarch that Essex had no design on the English throne himself, but worked only for James' succession. He further advised James to force the aging Queen to name him as her heir. While James began to build up his military power on a small scale, he had been unsuccessful in getting the Scottish Assembly to grant him additional funds for this project, and he could only reply that he would consider the advice and "put himself in readiness."

In February, 1600, James received word from Mountjoy of a decisive scheme to secure the English throne. Mountjoy was to replace Essex in Ireland,
and he would at the proper moment bring his forces home to join Essex, while the Scottish King, with a large army on the border, was to demand that Elizabeth recognize his succession. James did not act, and his reply, if any, remains a mystery. Mountjoy, who went to Ireland and impressively annihilated Tyrone’s forces, then turned and refused to bring his troops home to aid Essex’s coup, planned for February, 1601. Essex concluded that neither James nor Mountjoy could be relied upon for direct military aid. He asked the Scottish Monarch for a sign of his approval, promising in return that “You shall be declared and acknowledged the certain and undoubted successor to this Crown.” But James could not bring himself to sanction open rebellion against Elizabeth. He returned the secret cypher which was to symbolize his support, but he did not send his ambassador to London until after he knew the outcome of Essex’s unsuccessful raid on February 9, 1601. When Essex was arrested, tried and executed in three short weeks, James reacted cautiously. He believed that a general uprising was still possible, and he was willing to lead it himself if all it lacked was a leader to replace Essex. But if the game was done, as indeed it was, he had to protect himself from any association with Essex and build up a new following at court. Therefore, he directed his emissaries to sound the temper of the country and the court, and to gauge the possibility of rebellion, while proceeding cautiously “betweext these two precipices of the Queen and the people who now appear to be in so contrary terms.”

When his envoys arrived in London they found that Elizabeth had protected James’ claim and reputation. No mention of his involvement had been allowed to reach the public. And so they decided to abandon that part of their instructions charging them with securing a statement from Elizabeth to the effect that James was innocent of all involvement in the Essex affair. Instead, they proceeded with another aspect of their mission, to “dally with the present guiders of the court.” (25)

Yet this was no easy task. Sir Robert Cecil had triumphed over Essex at court only by discrediting the Earl’s charge that Cecil was a supporter of the Spanish Infanta. Even is Secretary Cecil did not favor the Spanish claimants, he had given little evidence of any sympathy for James’ cause. Thus the envoys were told to treat Cecil with due respect, but to make it clear to Cecil who was “king there, in effect” that James was offering a simple QUID PRO QUO. If, while Cecil and his followers dominated Elizabeth’s government “they will thus misknow me,” James promised to court them among his enemies and to treat them accordingly. (26)

But James’ fears were misconceived. While Elizabeth was openly resentful to his emissaries and sent James a letter indicating that she was aware of his involvement in the Essex plot though she kept it secret, her Secretary provided a greater surprise. In a secret audience, Cecil not only offered to support the Scottish cause but also promised a secret correspondence with James in which he would advise the King on how best to win back Elizabeth’s favour. Cecil’s overture set down strict limitations to protect those who were involved in the secret correspondence. To this end, numbers were used in place of names, several select and irregular carriers were chosen, and James was to promise not to ask again for a public guarantee of his succession.
As might be expected, James responded with guarded expressions of pleasure and encouragement, as he had done with Essex. Cecil replied by stating his desire to protect the aging Elizabeth and to defend his own actions and reputation. He was prevented by the idiosyncracies of her age and sex from publicly acknowledging this. As Cecil gained favor with the Scottish monarch, their relationship blossomed into an exchange of sweet flattery with James declaring "how happy I think myself by the conquest of so faithful and so wise a counsellor." (27) Cecil's admiration was overwhelming, but carefully tailored to his own ends. He continued to discourage James' bids for public support, urging him instead to trust their friends in the Privy Council whose guidance would steer James' ship "into the right harbours, without cross of wave or tide." (28)

Cecil took Henry Howard into his confidence and into the correspondence with James. To Howard fell the darker task of discrediting their political opponents. He reported on members of the Privy Council and the court who made slighting remarks or suggested policies which were detrimental to James' interests. Sometimes Howard misconstrued the advice of governmental officials for his own purposes. James accepted their assessment of courtiers and also their stories about the duplicity of their rivals, especially Sir Walter Raleigh, whose own tongue was as damaging as the libels of his enemies.

As Elizabeth's reign concluded, the Scottish monarch placed greater reliance on the efforts of his supporters at court to secure his accession. Yet he was reluctant to place all his hopes on the activities of Cecil and his followers, and he confided his doubts to his closest advisors. James tested Cecil's honesty and loyalty in various ways, and he continued his appeal for public support by keeping the presses and the courtiers active. He feared that if he ceased his appeals to supporters south of the border his silence would prompt them to look elsewhere, and so James considered sending a resident ambassador to London. But Cecil reassured him of his popularity in England, and at the Secretary's insistence James changed his mind about sending an ambassador. As Elizabeth lapsed into her fatal illness and James impatiently awaited each courier from Cecil and Howard, he still maintained contact with many other nobles.

Sir John Carey was the first to bring James the news, covering nearly 400 miles in less than 60 hours. Eight hours after Elizabeth's death on March 24, 1603, James was proclaimed King by the Privy Council in London, and many regional and borough announcements echoed their decision. In preparation, Cecil had arranged for the Stuart King to dispatch a writ maintaining the Councillors in power so that they could supervise the transition. Even before Elizabeth's death James had received and approved a draft of the document proclaiming his succession. All of the major fortresses as well as London were prepared to assure a peaceful Scottish succession, and the remaining contender, Arabella Stuart, was in virtual house arrest at Hardwick Hall.

The furor caused by the proclamation was not the rumble of rebellion but the pounding of horses' hooves as men raced to greet their new monarch. As the crowds rushed north to seek James' favor, it must have seemed, as Chamberlain observed, that "preferment were a goal to be gotten by
footsmanship.” James’ progress south convinced him of the success of his endeavors, and he retained a strong impression of his exhuberant reception. In this, his moment of triumph, he saw only a reflection of his own sentiments in his loyal English subjects whom he was to remember with “their eyes flaming nothing but sparkles of affection, their mouths and tongues uttering nothing but sounds of joy.” (29)

Prof. S. Hanft, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C.

FOOTNOTES


9. Willson, KING JAMES, 138. Professor Willson’s definitive study has shed light on several aspects of James’ activities for which this writer is indebted.


11. W. H. Stowell and D. Wilson, A HISTORY OF THE PURITANS AND
PILGRIMS. New York, 1888, 165.


13. McIlwain, WORKS OF JAMES, 7-8.


17. Ibid., 54-55, 55.


19. Willson, KING JAMES, 140-1. McIlwain, WORKS OF JAMES, xci-xciv.


21. Ibid., 105, 117.

22. Bruce, CORRESPONDENCE OF JAMES, 74-76.


25. Willson, KING JAMES, 149-153.

26. Bruce, CORRESPONDENCE OF JAMES, xxix, xxx-xxxii.

27. HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS COMMISSION, HARFIELD HOUSE MANUSCRIPTS, Part XV, 10, 27.

28. McElwee, WISEST FOOL, 89.

29. McClure, CHAMBERLAIN, 189.